

Review of *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* by Manu Karuka (University of California Press)

by Julia H. Lee | Book Reviews, Issue 9.1 (Spring 2020)

ABSTRACT *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* by Manu Karuka suggests that the Transcontinental Railroad is a useful lens through which to view issues relating continental imperialism, countersovereignty, and capitalist modes of production.

KEYWORDS Chinese American, indigenous peoples, labor, nation, sovereignty, Transcontinental Railroad, United States

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Manu Karuka calls the methodology that undergirds his important book *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* something "akin to meditation . . . a practice of liberation" (xv). Challenging the rhetoric of so much academic scholarship that uncomplicatedly privileges the idea that historical inquiry is about the "discovery" of some heretofore unknown "fact," "object," or "text" that has resided untouched in an archive and will surely provide a key to unlocking the experiences of marginalized, excluded, and violated racial communities, Karuka provides a method that simultaneously relies upon and questions alternative frames. It is not surprising then that within this longer study of the relationship between settler colonialism and racial capitalism there is a long disquisition on the place and function of rumor in the historical archive. The kind of intense positivist desire for Truth—what Karuka calls the "doctrine of discovery," and which Karuka particularly resists—pervades the work on the Transcontinental Railroad, perhaps because there are, as Karuka himself notes, library shelves groaning with the weight of studies/monographs looking to "recover" that which the archive was never constructed or meant to acknowledge or preserve.

The Transcontinental Railroad offers a lens through which Karuka can explore three interrelated issues, which are briefly laid out in the book's introduction. The first is the continental imperialism that is the foundation of the United States as a nation. The fiction of national sovereignty also interacts with Karuka's conception of countersovereignty, in which a recognition on the part of the United States to "prior and ongoing" Indigenous claims of sovereignty over territory "provides a substructure to stabilize U.S. property

claims" (xii). It is this belatedness in relation to Native claims that characterizes US countersovereignty and that contributes to the anxiety that US sovereignty is always simultaneously unfinished and in crisis. The third issue that Karuka covers is that of *modes of relationship*, which is a way of talking about capitalism itself as a historically contingent form that produced certain kinds of relationships. These three themes are important to *Empire's Tracks* because they move away from the dominant narrative of the Transcontinental Railroad that tends to emphasize the competitive nature of the endeavor, the "linearity of its trajectory" that paints "capitalism as a coherent and discrete system" (xiii).

Karuka's attempts to rethink historical methodology are particularly prevalent in the organization of *Empire's Tracks*. The book contains nine chapters and an epilogue. The first two chapters of the book explore its central concepts of countersovereignty and modes of relationship. The last two chapters comprise theoretical explorations of concepts such as "shareholder whiteness" (a new form of white supremacy enabled by the railroad) and the convergence of Lenin's theory of imperialism with Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis on the frontier. The five chapters that are sandwiched between these introductory and concluding theoretical chapters are historical in their orientation, charting the history of railroad colonialism across the Americas. These chapters represent the heart of the book and theorize core ideas about the critique of political economy through the histories of colonized peoples. To my mind these chapters most fully articulate Karuka's theories regarding the railroad's function: as a "phantom subject" through which capitalism "appears as multiply refracted" (xiv). Particularly useful is the chapter "Railroad Colonialism," which highlights how the railroad was not the expression of a uniquely American ideal but has been part of a global "infrastructure of reaction" undertaken by colonialist forces in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Australia (40). Railroads were instrumental in campaigns of military conquest and enabled the expansion of bureaucracy which was seeking ways to further justify the occupation of Indigenous lands. (As an aside, the preponderance of former Union and Confederate officers who then went on to work on the railroad in official capacities after the Civil War's conclusion—as surveyors, photographers, cartographers, and the like—speaks to the intimate connection between the railroad as infrastructure and the railroad as colonizing tool in the nation's interior and west.) The government's granting of lands to railroad companies transformed these entities into "key instruments of the war-finance nexus," which in turn "facilitated the growth of finance capital" not only in the US but globally (46). This is the point that Karuka returns to at various points throughout the study: the railroads expanded and refined racial capitalism just as surely as nineteenth-century capital financed the railroad in the first place.

Karuka insists that his book is not one interested in the "recovery" of experiences of indigenous or Chinese subjects; he writes that the "historian crafting narrative through the prose of countersovereignty will remain on frustrated terrain . . . [such narratives] can find no proper resolution, only endless deferrals" (19). But I would contend that the absence of resolution characterizes all text, regardless of the perspective from which it is being written; the key then is to identify the extent to which texts foreground these "endless deferrals" or the extent to which they claim that these deferrals are anything but. While respecting Karuka's refusal to "prove" the interiority of native and Chinese experiences, I would nevertheless have welcomed the chance to read about these deferred moments and Karuka's take on them. Nevertheless, *Empire's Tracks* powerfully and effectively portrays how US countersovereignty uses the railroad to stop the unraveling of its own claims to land and space through an unceasing campaign of extirpation and violence. Its

contributions to critiques of settler colonialism and racial capitalism are substantial and are sure to be influential in years to come.

Author Information

Julia H. Lee

Julia H. Lee is associate professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California at Irvine. She is the author of *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896–1937* (New York University Press, 2010) and *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (University of South Carolina Press, 2016). Her book-in-progress, *The Racial Railroad*, examines the prevalence of the train as a setting for scenes of racial formation and conflict in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century American cultural texts. She teaches courses on a variety of subjects including the Asian American *bildungsroman*, contemporary Asian American fiction, race and urban space, Asian American women, and critical race studies.

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